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ABSTRACT

Intended to help reading educators keep their teaching practices and goals up to date, this booklet examines current reading instruction and assesses the state of reading research and trends. Following a brief discussion of the meaning of reading and literacy, a section on the status of reading discusses how well children read today and whether the teaching practices of the past are really the answer to today's reading problems. The next section, on research on teaching reading, gives a historical overview of reading research trends, discusses the research focus on comprehension and its implications for teaching, and examines the critical role of the teacher in reading instruction. A bibliography concludes the booklet. (HTH)

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What Research Says to the Teacher

# Reading: Trends and Challenges

by Roger Farr

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# INTRODUCTION

As professionals who would develop readers—and thus thinkers and doers—we must keep our roads to professional knowledge open. This is the very principle essential to guaranteeing literacy. Because reading is the heart of education, the opportunities for all persons to learn must remain as open as we have kept our professional quest.

Our search for more effective means to teach reading must begin with a continuous reexamination of both our literacy goals and our definition of what it means to be literate. Thus this monograph begins with a brief review of these topics. It is not adequate to merely review our goals, however, if we expect to improve. In addition, we need to know how successful our past efforts have been. Improvement is based on an understanding of strengths and weaknesses. Despite significant accomplishments in promoting literacy for all citizens, much remains to be done. For example, while more children than ever before have reached basic literacy levels, there seems to be a leveling off or even a slight decline in higher-level reading comprehension skills.

Instructional practices are based on agreed-upon goals as well as on an understanding of strengths and weaknesses. But it is research that provides us with insights into the particular strategies to adopt and adapt in our classrooms. Research, however, includes not only those controlled experiments designed to study learning processes, but also the traditions of good teaching growing from the years of trial-and-error efforts of numerous teachers—a kind of continuing action research.

# WHAT IS READING?

The study of reading usually evolves into the broader study of literacy. And the study of literacy becomes involved with such issues as functional literacy (88, 40),* the definitions of functional and basic literacy (59, 56), and the nature of literacy (75, 77).

*Numbers in parentheses appearing in the text refer to the Bibliography beginning on page 26.

For purposes of this monograph the definition of literacy is broader than merely a person's ability to read and write. This simple definition omits a vital dimension—the use of literacy skills to provide a person with one more opportunity for a richer and fuller life. The added dimension emphasizes comprehension and communication of ideas as the goals of literacy. Both *Roget's College Thesaurus* (1976) and the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* (1978) emphasize disseminating knowledge and increasing understanding as the key dimensions of literacy when they list *ignorant* as the prime synonym of *illiterate*. Other synonyms for *illiterate* in the *Thesaurus* include *unread, uncultivated, unlearned, unlettered,* and *empty-headed.* Since the *Thesaurus* and the *Random House Dictionary* attempt to reflect common usage, it becomes obvious that illiteracy has a general connotation of lack of knowledge and understanding.

If the definition of literacy emphasizes comprehension, it follows that reading, as one aspect of literacy, should also be concerned primarily with comprehension. When we examine reading as a comprehension or information process, we come to understand that (1) the process involves *getting meaning from* and *bringing meaning to* the printed page; (2) reading depends on one's language development and background; (3) grammatical patterns and the redundancy of language are cues to comprehension; (4) reading is communication; and (5) why one reads determines what one takes away from the reading.

The goal of reading instruction is obviously confused when a teacher states that he or she is attempting to teach children to love reading. We should not be trying to encourage children to love reading. Rather, we should be teaching reading so that children learn that reading is one more avenue to help them do and enjoy those things they want to do and enjoy.

To prove the point, the following experiment might help. The next time a teacher proclaims her or his love for reading, offer that person a 500-page book on nonparametric statistics. Unless the teacher is a statistician, the response will usually be a polite "No, thank you," accompanied by an explanation of the person's general interests and particular reading preferences. The point is obvious—we all want to read the things that will help us learn about something, build or repair something, vicariously enjoy an author's experiences or life in anoth-

er time or setting. We do not read just for the sheer joy of casting our eyes across printed symbols. We read for the personal meaning in the result of reading and that should be our goal in teaching children to read. We can teach children to love making things, finding out about new ideas, and enjoying a variety of experiences, but we cannot teach them to love reading. Reading is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

## STATUS OF READING

Critics of education have been very obvious throughout the history of U.S. education. The focus of much of their criticism has been on reading and literacy. At times, these critics have identified important educational problems; but, in general, they have based their attacks on personal biases and have not substantiated their claims with data.

Arthur E. Bestor's *Educational Wastelands* (4) exemplified the long-running debate about the effectiveness of "today's education." Bestor insisted that "educationists" had taken intellectual disciplines out of the educating process, and as a result, children were not being taught how to think. More frequently, however, attacks on the development of language skills in the schools were less intellectual than Bestor's, citing merely examples of poor spelling and grammatical usage by children.[1]

In 1955 with the appearance of Rudolph Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read* (38)—contending that phonics instruction in the schools had been replaced by a "look-say" method, as a result of which the children of the nation were unable to read—criticism focused on reading instruction. This book had considerable impact and generated substantial lay and professional response. In reviewing and writing about it, most periodicals included critical responses: In *Newsweek*, William S. Gray stressed that there was more than one method to teach reading;[2] in *Time*, Ruth Dunbar called the book a "hue and cry directed at a strawman."[3] Flesch was subjected to analyses pointing out numerous errors in his book; arguing that he was writing about pronouncing—not understanding—words; and insisting that phonics was being taught, in conjunction with other methods. Several pub-

lications initiated lengthy series about how reading was being taught.[4] It was a flare-up in a debate that continues even today.[5]

With the advent of Sputnik in 1956, the concern whipped up by Flesch boiled over. Although initially focused on science training, it quickly expanded to education in general and to reading in particular. Comparisons of U.S. and Russian schools attempted to explain how our nation lost the first lap in the race into space. Flesch's contention that phonics was a key answer being ignored became the critics' battle cry; the *Saturday Review's* attempt to suggest that reading instruction was more complex than a phonics versus "look-say" dilemma earned a reader's tart response: "There is a real war on in reading, and for the future well-being of American Education, it is important that the right side win."[6]

Exemplifying the impact of the space race on educational criticism, Arthur Trace's *What Ivan Knows That Johnny Doesn't* (96) insisted that, contrary to popular opinion, Russian schools did not neglect training in the humanities in favor of math and science. Rather, the book asserted, they did a much better job than U.S. schools. In the *Saturday Evening Post* (97), Trace compared the U.S. reading texts' controlled vocabularies with what he claimed were the Russian pupils' much larger lexicons developed at the earliest ages.

Trace's book and a collection edited by Charles C. Walcutt (101), although typical of criticism in the early 1960's, were not heavily supported with data. Oddly, there was no tendency in such debate to apply achievement trend data, which in those years would have shown marked gains in comparison with any previous periods.

A third great wave of concern and criticism has resulted from the reported decline in test scores—particularly on college entrance exams—and it is, once again, highly attentive to reading and reading-related areas.

## Literacy and Equality

Before reviewing the data regarding reading trends, it is important to review the trend in U.S. schools to equalize educational opportunities. Without a recognition of this movement, we will not be able to fully appreciate the trends in reading achievement.

Any review of the data regarding school enrollments indicates tremendous progress in extending educational opportunities to broader segments of our population. While in 1950 less than half of the high school graduates went on to college, by 1977 that figure reached 80 percent. Obviously, our schools are now offering college preparatory curricula to many more children of varying abilities and educational backgrounds while imparting basic literacy in general. Surely this has much to do with desegregation which began in the 1950's.

In acknowledging this situation, one need not be naive about the degree of progress made in equalizing educational opportunity—it varies by state and locality, and in some areas has only recently had anything like a full effect. The history of education for Blacks in an inland county in Florida makes this point clear.

After the Civil War, separate schools for black children were first established in Florida in 1866. Before that time, any education of black children in that state was the concern of two private agencies. In some areas, state-supported educational opportunity came much later. Although settlement of this particular central Florida county began in 1911, the quality of education for Blacks has improved very slowly. All but a few of the county's Blacks still live in segregated "quarters" apart from the county's three major towns. Most of them have always been migrant farm hands, educated until 1938 in church schools when there were no crops to harvest. In that year, a state-supported school began in one of the black communities. Forced integration of schools within the county—from the lower grades up—did not begin until 1971 and was not completed until 1979–80. Attendance of black children is still quite irregular and unenforced.

This brief history of the education of black students in one county helps explain the fact that in 1978, 70 percent of the minority students in Florida who took the state's competency test failed it. In many areas of the United States, black children have moved slowly from segregated systems into the mainstream school systems, bringing with them the disadvantaged background of the separatist schools they were forced to attend. That the NAEP study (72) showed the greatest gains between 1971 and 1975 for black nine-year-olds in the Southeast United States is surely no coincidence.

There has not been widespread agreement that these efforts to ensure equal opportunities in education have been compatible with

providing quality education; in fact, a growing chorus of criticism has attacked not only the methods, materials, and teachers developed in an attempt to improve education for all, but the entire comprehensive educational system as well. Generally, such criticism focuses on the declining scores of students taking the college entrance exams, without acknowledging either the fact that this group is significantly larger and broader than in the past or other achievement data showing improvement for the total student population. Ironically, this lack of understanding regarding the progress achieved in the U.S. educational system is not shared by nations such as Sweden and Great Britain. These countries see the highest-achieving U.S. students performing at least on a par with their own (105), and find the remaining U.S. citizens better prepared by comprehensive schools than their citizens are prepared by more elitist, separatist systems for the educational age.

As Daniel Tanner (90) notes in a recent article:

> It is ironic that in the 1970s various American commissions and panels advocated that we abandon the American invention of comprehensive schooling at a time when advanced nations, after a long and continuing effort toward educational reform, are beginning to make significant progress toward instituting this model. . . . This movement reflected the need for a more highly educated populace to meet the industrial and technical demands of post-war development and "also as a means toward social and political justice in terms of social mobility and economic equality."

The U.S. system has been committed to developing each citizen's potential into as viable a commodity as possible in modern society so that both the society and the individual can achieve success. Thus the goal to provide equality in public education has at the same time been bound to the objective which would provide quality education.

Ralph Tyler (98) emphasizes the dual achievement of U.S. schools in providing quality education while continuing to expand equality of educational opportunities:

> This review of cross-national data on educational achievement

indicates that the U.S. educational system has clearly been responsive both to the rapid changes in society and to its basic democratic ideology. It has reached a larger proportion of its young people than almost all other nations, while its top 5% have attained the same high scores reached by nations that attempt to teach only a small fraction of their 18-year-olds. There are still problems to be solved, but the progress is encouraging. (p. 310)

## How Well Do They Read?

"Why can't kids read any more?" "Why are you wasting my kid's time with projects and games when you ought to be teaching her how to read?"

It is probable that most teachers have been bombarded with such questions and comments from concerned parents and other residents in their community about the reading performance of children today. These loaded questions may come from parents who have not yet taken the time to sit down with their children to discover that they are reading to complete the games and projects.

It is not difficult to identify the sources that provoke these questions. Magazines and newspapers regularly carry articles contending that our students lack adequate reading skills and concluding that the level of reading competency of children and adults declines every year. Television and radio commentaries offer similar messages, but rarely do such "analyses" attempt to cite relevant statistics or meaningful research to support their claims. Frequently they rely on selected examples or inappropriate data to do so.

## Were the "Good Old Days" Really Better?

In his syndicated column, Andy Rooney recently aimed his arsenal of questions at society's inclination to go back to the "good old days." Noting improvements in several key aspects of life, Rooney wondered if we really do want to return to the past. No aspect of life is more subject to the nostalgic criticism that concerns Rooney than is education. "Beck to the basics" and minimum competency seem to be

rationalized on the premise that children of today do not read as well as children of the same age in the past and the explanation for this difference may relate, in part, to instructional methodologies prevalent in the "good old days" but now supposedly abandoned. Yet a critical look at existing reading performance data seriously questions the assumption that reading performance has declined; and even a rapid survey of the thousands of reading studies of the past 60 years emphasizes the development of reading methodologies and materials of a complex structure founded on—not opposed to—those of the "good old days."

In general, the reporting of reading performance data over time is very spotty. And when reports are complete enough to permit evaluation of the research designs, they reveal data from a variety of tests given to samples often poorly matched and data, more often than not, subjected to only limited and questionable statistical treatment and analysis (28, 34). Dependable reading achievement trend data are extremely difficult to effect because of differences in key educational factors, such as age-grade relationships, changes in curricula, and changes in tests—both in content and in measurement techniques.

Equally important, no achievement trend data is fully meaningful without the careful analysis of a host of relevant socioeconomic, demographic, and other societal factors for the two periods from which scores are being compared. Very rarely have any trend data been accompanied by a thorough contextual analysis of the periods studied; but any study which includes such an analysis is likely to point up so many pronounced differences that influence schools, tests, and test performance as to question the validity of comparing scores across time at all (6).

The foregoing limitations restrict the interpretations of any reading trend studies. Nevertheless, there is no research on reading trends to demonstrate *any* decline in reading achievement for the lower primary grades; rather, the available data depict continuous improvement at that level (50). Thus if reading instruction research and the consequent recommended methodologies and materials have contributed to some decline in national reading ability, such studies must not include data for beginning and early reading. Both areas have been the subject of a burgeoning mass of research with instructional implications (24).

There is conflicting evidence on reading trends for the upper grades—that is, in the wake of score declines on some tests given at these levels, other reliable trend data demonstrate improvement (50, 94, 29). Nor is there any reliable synthesis of the data for these grades. Thus—despite the media's seeming conviction that children today are not taught to read as well as children in the past—the verdict on the effectiveness of reading instruction is not yet in; nor is it likely to be in until we have much more and significantly better data, carefully and cautiously synthesized.

One of the important limitations of evidence cited to support reading performance decline is that it is based primarily on data from college entrance exams, and therefore reflects on only a percentage of our student population in grades 11 and 12.[8] If we are to view these students as the highest achievers of reading instruction, we must take into account how that test-taking population has changed with the increasingly extended opportunity for higher education to more students.

## RESEARCH ON TEACHING READING

Almost all reading research has been conducted since 1900. By now, this is quite an extensive body of research, and it has been related to the interests and expertise of many other areas, including linguistics, communications, psychology, and medicine.

In 1925, William S. Gray collected and summarized over 400 reading research studies reported up to that time. Each year since, this annual summary has attempted to abstract all published reading research. By the 1960's, over 140 reports were identified each year. By the early 1970's, the annual average number rose to 300. By the mid-1970's, the annual summary included between 500 to 600 new research reports each year; and the 1980 volume summarized over 1,000, for a grand total of nearly 12,000 studies since the time this educational research was first published. Thus, in about 15 years the total number of the collection had doubled, and it seems probable that the number will double again by 1990.

While the diversity of this mass of research is fascinating, each year a high percentage of the summaries either have concerned studies of

reading instruction methodologies or have had potential implications for instruction. A quick review of any of these studies suggests that the research-recommended methods of the "good old days" are the foundation of today's instruction. Forty or more years ago, a cornerstone was in place for each of the various approaches to teaching reading from which today's teachers select methods to meet diverse student needs.

## Historical Review of Research Trends

Before 1900, the McGuffey reader was in wide use as the forerunner of the basal reader, which has since dominated reading instruction in this country. By 1900, rote memorization of the alphabet as initial reading instruction had given way both to phonic methods and to learning sight words. In addition, the seeds for today's emphasis on comprehension were sown: the study of reading as saccadic eye movements and pauses encompassing units of meaning was already affecting instructional methods. In addition, between 1910 and 1920 there was a growing emphasis on research to explain reading disabilities—still a major interest of reading specialists today. And the kinds of controversies about instructional techniques that are frequent today were prevalent then. Even among those advocating strong emphasis on phonics there was disagreement about teaching methods—as to the feasibility of synthetic alphabets, for example, and how to teach initial and final blend sounds.

Other instructional concerns were also surfacing in the 1920's. An emphasis on silent reading was closely tied to the development of standardized reading tests. Although standardized testing is considerably improved today, it exercises an almost intimidating influence on the evaluation of reading instruction; and this results in much instruction geared to effect test results. In the 1930's the research and theorizing about silent reading sought to distinguish it from oral reading. Today researchers are continuing to better understand the interrelationship of language activities. Unfortunately, however, there is no assurance that this real-life perspective on reading is even closely approximated by the assessment of most standardized, criterion-referenced, or minimum competency tests. As the current

phenomenon of minimum competency testing sweeps the nation, language research is suggesting that the factored subskills it tends to measure do not add up to the reading act.

Important new emphases in the 1930's were evident in major studies on reading interests and comprehension. These studies are intricately related in developing current understanding of reading as a meaningful activity enabling the reader to acquire needed information and ideas of personal interest. This vein of research coupled with later linguistic influences directs many of today's researchers seeking a description of reading as a whole language activity.

The 1930's also saw the development of several other research perspectives that are prevalent in reading today—for example, areas related to remedial reading and to readiness for initial instruction. During the same period, attention to individual differences led to homogeneous grouping, and publishers became concerned about the readability of texts. Today these emphases generate much research, theorizing, methodology, and instruction geared toward a child's prereading experiences and toward the individualization of reading instruction and materials.

The new concern for readability in the 1930's also led to vocabulary control and the kind of text that is satirized even today for its "Dick and Jane" insipidity. Interestingly, such texts still bear the brunt of accusations linking them to the charge that schools are failing to teach reading. Yet Dick and Jane readers were obsolete long before the 60's students with declining SAT scores entered first grade. In fact, students who learned to read with Dick and Jane were progressing through school during the 1940's and 1950's, and no data shows anything but increasing reading achievement scores for those years. Without sanctioning the limited interest of the Dick-and-Jane-type materials, it should be noted that a great many Americans learned to read by using them, and that material/student ability fit is still a solid instructional concept.

However, even with the attention to both reading problems and material fit, educators in the 1930's had yet to learn the importance of matching readability to the individual abilities of slow readers who were likely to be faced with materials designed for average pupils at their grade levels. Through the years we have learned the importance of not frustrating students with materials they cannot read; but even

today, in many schools the concept of a child's independent reading level as the appropriate instructional level does not have instructional impact.

One might ask why the failure in the 1930's to effectively teach slow learners did not show up on test results. The answer is that these children were held back to be scored at lower grade levels until they could be encouraged to drop out of school. It is important to note that during this period the keen interest in poorer performers was not yet accompanied by a national movement to keep children in school. Nor was there the intense concern for equal educational opportunities that we are experiencing today. In 1930, a sizable percentage of children of low ability either were not in school or dropped out soon after entering. Nonetheless, through the succeeding years a continuing emphasis on extending educational opportunities to children of all backgrounds and abilities and on keeping children in school was accompanied by increases in reading achievement as measured by standardized tests. This fact says a great deal about the development of the teaching of reading in the schools—at least as it is taught to such tests. Even in the mid- to late 1960's, when fuller integration of our schools was slowly materializing and we were moving children from educational backgrounds that had been limited into the mainstream of our educational system, test scores at elementary levels increased.

The development of several instructional methodologies in the 1930's was a reaction to the low interest levels of the tight vocabulary control in texts. Teachers began seeking and using more "outside" materials geared to student interests. They developed the "language experience" approach, in which children composed their own reading materials. Today, availability of a broad range of reading materials to match student interests and needs is understood as a basic requirement for effective instruction; yet students in teachers' colleges who encounter language experience are likely to assume it is some new technique to be condemned or defended as a bold departure from the basic instructional practices of the "good old days."

The 1930's also laid the foundation for the most promising current research emphasis with the teaching of word meaning by using syntactic and semantic clues. Thus the use of word parts and the use of context clues were coupled with phonic analysis in word recognition.

The teaching of reading has never been exclusively phonetic or visual recognition, or exclusively meaning-oriented. Critics would often have us believe that the use of phonics is extinct or that lower achievement scores have resulted from innovations. Yet early in this century phonics instruction itself was an innovation over a strict letter (A, B, C) approach. If phonics instruction ever prevailed to the exclusion of other methods, it would have happened sometime in the 1920's before the widespread use of syntax and context and other methodologies.

Current teaching methodologies do not stand as some newly proposed absolute unrelated to the methodologies of the past. If today's reading instruction could be generalized across individual teachers and their strengths and weaknessess—if it could be generalized across individual students and their abilities and needs—then the one word that might legitimately describe it is *eclectic*: "selecting what appears to be the best or true in various and diverse doctrines or methods; rejecting a single, unitary, and exclusive interpretation, doctrine, or method. . . . " (103) This is the ultimate merging of all the understanding developed through reading research over the years. Especially significant was the early recognition of the importance of individualized instruction, which is well served by the options open to contemporary teachers.

It is also important to note that over the past seven decades there has been continuous improvement in the education of teachers. While we need to recognize the significant contributions of the teachers of decades ago, today's typical teacher is better educated and more qualified than those of prior years. In analyzing the causes for the increased literacy levels of elementary students, the contribution of excellent teachers is certainly an important factor.

## Comprehension—the Continuing Focus of Research and Practice

It is not surprising that the most promising emphasis of research on learning to read has focused on comprehension. Comprehension is, after all, the essential condition of reading, for without an understanding of what is read, there is no reading. Only the most naive

person would equate reading with the act of pronouncing words, as in such statements as "This child reads well. It's just that she doesn't comprehend what she reads." Obviously such a statement is absurd. Researchers of the reading process, from Thorndike (92) to those of today (82), have demonstrated that the central focus of all aspects of reading is comprehension. As these researchers have learned more and more about the reading process, they have demonstrated the futility of attempting to separate reading into the mechanics of pronouncing words and the comprehension of those words.

Moreover, the emphasis on comprehension has been more than a narrow emphasis on the literal meaning of the text. In 1949, Gates (41) stated that reading was neither simply a mechanical skill nor merely a "thought-getting" process. According to Gates, reading "can and should embrace all types of thinking, evaluating, judging, imagining, reasoning, and problem solving." He further emphasized that the reading act is completed or nears completion when the child applies his/her understanding in some practical way.

While reading researchers have historically focused on comprehension, their efforts have usually been to identify the components of reading comprehension (19). They have attempted to study reading comprehension by associating word meanings with symbols, selecting correct meanings of phrases, organizing the separate ideas that are read, retaining concepts, and evaluating and critiquing ideas. Some researchers (27) have attempted to study reading comprehension by examining a reader's ability to handle increasingly larger segments of material—moving from separate facts and details to the meaning of a larger, unitary idea, for example.

A historical review of the studies on reading comprehension emphasizes that what is being learned about reading today is based on the work of past researchers. Early studies attempted to view reading as a set of separate and distinct skills; they tried to determine the components of reading comprehension; and they sought to understand how a reader comprehends a single meaning from printed material. Building on those studies, researchers and theorists have begun to truly understand reading comprehension as a much broader concept. Studies being conducted today focus on the logical process when one reads: building on the background of concepts, experiences, and language that the reader brings to the printed page. In a

sense, the author's ideas are seeded in the reader's background. As the reader attempts to explore his or her own ideas, to modify them, to fit new ideas into the organization of her or his thinking, and to construct still new ideas, she/he is involved in a constant process of concept development.

In a recent paper, Adams and Bruce (1) describe the importance of background knowledge and the role of language in learning. They introduce this seemingly simple concept by stating:

> So much of what we learn, we learn through language. Certainly most of our formal learning is acquired through language. These observations seem almost too common to set in print. Yet, they turn from banal to deeply paradoxical with the realization that we can only learn through language that which we, in some sense, already know. That is, through language, novel concepts can only be communicated in the form of novel combinations of familiar concepts. (p. 1)

The Adams and Bruce analysis of reading comprehension describes how a reader's understanding depends on his or her conceptual knowledge, social knowledge, and story knowledge. After discussing the research that supports their position, the authors return to their main thesis that new learning grows out of prior learning:

> To say that background knowledge is often used, or is useful, in comprehending a story is misleading. . . . In fact, reading comprehension involves the construction of ideas out of preexisting concepts. A more correct statement of the role of background knowledge would be that comprehension is the use of prior knowledge to create new knowledge. Without prior knowledge, a complex object, such as a text, is not just difficult to interpret; strictly speaking, it is meaningless. (pp. 36–37)

The analysis that Adams and Bruce present is one that has developed from a continuing study of the reading process. And the future will certainly bring increased understanding of that process with a myriad of implications and challenges for teaching reading. That

challenge for educators was framed very cogently by Robert Thorndike in a 1974 review of research on reading comprehension (93).

> If reading is reasoning, we face at one and the same time a barrier and a challenge. The barrier is that set by the child's limited comprehension of what he reads, which we see now as not primarily a deficit in one or more specific and readily teachable reading skills but as a reflection of generally meager intellectual processes. And this barrier promises to stand in the way of a wide range of future learnings.
>
> The challenge is to overcome this barrier by better and more inventive teaching—not solely to read, but also to think. Because as we improve the understanding with which a child reads, we may concurrently improve the effectiveness with which he processes a wide range of information important in his development. The challenge is also to learn to exploit for educational advantage the individual's resources for reasoning through other media than words, so that the barrier of verbal limitation may be bypassed whenever it is not relevant. (p. 147)

## Implications for Teaching Reading

To contend that reading instruction in most classrooms in the United States has been eclectic since the 1930's does not ignore the existence of many issues and differences of opinion among reading specialists and researchers. There are indeed proponents of instructional approaches that are relatively exclusive of other approaches. Nor does arguing that all methodologies in practice today have roots in those of the earlier decades of this century mean that most of the questions about reading have been answered. The ongoing attempt to define and assess literacy is only one example of an unresolved issue in reading. And if ever we have fully definitive answers to some questions—which is unlikely—those answers will only lead to new questions. That's what research is—a way of asking questions and searching for answers.

What, then, can we say about the teaching of reading after 80 years and over 12,000 investigations? What do we know with certainty about effective and ineffective reading instruction? Some statements

can be made with the assurance that most researchers and teachers will agree with them. Learning depends—among other factors—on good teaching practices, and teachers should guarantee the public that they will use good practices. They cannot be expected to guarantee test score results, however, any more than doctors can guarantee patients will live and prosper or lawyers can guarantee they will win cases. As in medicine and law, there is certainly a direct connection between practices and results in reading, but only the practices can be guaranteed.

We know today that good reading instruction practices are exemplified by the following:

1. Learning to read should involve children in experiences that they enjoy and that demonstrate that reading is a way to gain information, to solve problems, to encounter ideas, and to be entertained. This involves the teacher in identifying real reasons for children to read. Reading is the comprehension and subsequent use of ideas.

2. How the various skills should be taught and whether or not drilling on them really develops the whole act of reading are unresolved questions; but it is safe to say that the more closely skill-drill exercise is associated with a student's personal reasons for reading, the more likely such exercise is to develop readers. This means that the teacher who elects to exercise subskills purported to relate to reading should assure that the exercise involves content which is meaningful to the student.

3. An effective classroom and curriculum organization will provide the child with many types of reading opportunities and will be geared to the needs and interests of *individual* children as much as possible. Thus good practice involves making available many types of reading material on many topics at a variety of appropriate readability levels. It requires the teacher's learning as much as possible about each child's background, interests, needs, and abilities. This is an ongoing assessment of each child that should continuously determine classroom activities.

4. Materials used for instruction should be at a level of difficulty that allows the child to read fluently without assistance (his or her instructional reading level—IRL). No child should be forced to read material that is too difficult and that frustrates the child's attempt to comprehend.

5. Good instruction relies on diagnosis from a variety of ongoing assessments including criterion-referenced tests, informal teacher-made instruments, and, above all, teacher observation. Such diagnosis is used in individualized instruction to help plan teaching that aims at helping each child reach her or his potential.

6. Good teaching practices do not assume that the full responsibility for developing literate citizens lies within the classroom walls. Instead, the classroom activities build on school, community, and broader events, reaching out to the world to make the lessons meaningful and to exploit materials and media beyond the classroom.

The following are examples of poor teaching practices:

1. The drilling and testing of vocabulary and reading subskills isolated from a meaningful context

2. The setting of arbitrary and mandatory goals enforced at grade levels with no regard for individual differences and measured with tests which determine if a child succeeds or fails

3. The use of formal testing in lieu of daily teacher observation to judge the success or failure of students—with the result of retaining, discouraging, and eventually pushing out of schools those who fail the tests

4. The boring and wasteful practice of having children read aloud in turn as their peers sit and attempt to predict the page or paragraph they will have to read

5. The use of grade equivalents as determined by standardized tests in lieu of Instructional Reading Levels.

It should be noted that these examples of good and bad practices do not include any theories or approaches to teaching reading. As has been emphasized here, the approaches and the resulting methodologies the teacher uses should be determined largely by the needs and interests of the individual children he or she teaches.

## The Teacher Is Still the Key

There are, of course, continuing controversies regarding the teaching of reading. But the teacher can make a difference, regardless of the theoretical position taken on these issues. Most studies have difficulty determining whether one method or another made a difference, but few studies have any difficulty discerning that the *teacher does make a difference.*

If the teacher will take the time to review his or her own beliefs and to develop practices based on those beliefs, children will learn. "If so many experts can't agree," the teacher may ask, "why do I have to wrestle with a definition of reading?" A noted psycholinguist, Frank Smith (81), has answered the question eloquently:

> Many teachers are trained to be ignorant, to rely on the opinions of experts or superiors rather than on their own judgment. The questions I am asked after lectures to teachers (on the topic of reading) are always eminently practical—how should reading be taught, which method is best, and what should be done about a real life child of eight who has the devastating misfortune to read like a statistically fictitious child of six? Teachers do not ask the right kind of question—instead of asking what they should do, which can never be answered with the generality they expect, they should ask what they need to know in order to decide for themselves. It is a monument to the efficiency of the brainwashing that teachers received during their training that they are practically immune to consult on the topic of their own intellectual capacity. The only time teachers express surprise or disbelief is when it is suggested that their own expe-

rience and intuition might be as good a guide for action as the dogma of some expert. (p. 46)

The following comment written by a new teacher in a graduate course in reading demonstrates the application of Smith's admonition to classroom practice:

> When I started teaching this summer, I had every intention of staying away from the "skills" approach of teaching reading. I did not believe that everything had to be labeled. I really thought this would bore the kids. I thought language experience was the best approach. If the children could relate to what they were reading, I felt that naturally they would learn. It was my intention to find out their individual interests and go from there. I wanted their reading experiences to be as natural as possible. Idealistically, I thought teaching in this manner would make me an instant success as a teacher. I asked the kids to talk about themselves, gave them interest inventories, and brought in books related to what they each liked. But, nothing seemed to be clicking. I had no idea what I wanted them to learn. The children seemed totally lost and so was I.
>
> At this point, I began working mainly with skills to give the kids some type of structure. I soon found out that worksheets were boring and the kids were about as disinterested as I was. At this point I was becoming disillusioned, having no idea what I believed or what I was going to do. If I had no idea what I wanted, how could I teach the kids anything? I really began to think.
>
> I wrote down what I believed vs. what I did not believe about reading on a sheet of paper and then began to rationalize these thoughts. Things were falling into a logical order. I began to see reading as a "relationship" between skills, which I felt were important now, and some language experience concepts. I felt that it would be possible for a child to naturally develop skills through language experience activities. The kids would have some structure relating to their skills, and, at the same time,

have the freedom that goes along with language experience. After teaching in this way, I really started to see my theory in action. I felt the kids were learning and progressing. Tying together language experience with reading skills seems to effectively implement my theory of reading.

FOOTNOTES

[1]E.g., an English teacher exemplifies language incompetence as spelling errors in the *Chicago Tribune*, February 16, 1962, p. 8.
[2]March 21, 1955.
[3]June 20, 1955.
[4]E.g., *Christian Science Monitor*, beginning October 7, 1955.
[5]Witness Flesch's reemergence to revoice his argument in *Family Circle*, November 1, 1979.
[6]"But There Is No Peace," *Saturday Review*, April 21, 1962, p. 54. A response to comment in that periodical January 20, 1962.
[7]The internal quotation is cited from "The International Context." In *Half Way There: Report on the British Comprehensive School Reform*, edited by Caroline Benn and B. Simon (London: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. 1.
[8]See Wirtz *et al.* (1977) with particular attention to their caveats about extending implications of SAT declines beyond grades 11 and 12 (p. 5); Farr and Tone (1978); and Farr (1979).

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